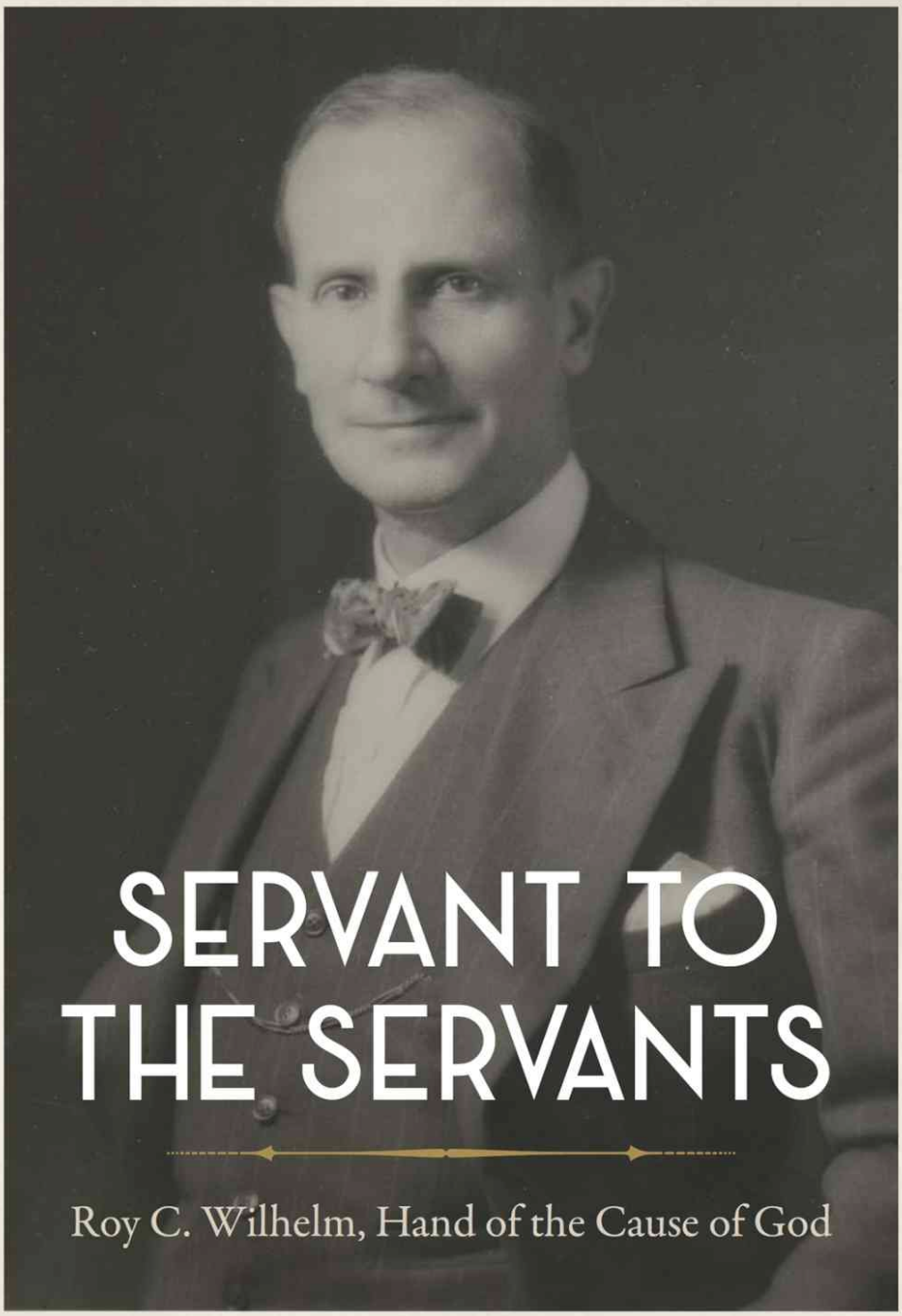

SERVANT TO THE SERVANTS

Roy C. Wilhelm, Hand of the Cause of God

Joel Nizin, Kathryn Jewett Hogenson, *and* Gary L. Hogenson

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By
Joel Nizin, Kathryn Jewett Hogenson, and Gary L. Hogenson

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To my favorite and only wife Vickie René,
my dearest daughters Zia Tahirih and Anisa Jamal,
and my parents, Florence and Harry Nizin,
who are together forever in the Abhá Kingdom.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This book contains provisional English translations of letters of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. These letters, which were addressed to and sent to their respective recipients, should not be regarded as authorized translations of authenticated documents but are included for their historical value. Many of the photos in the book come from the US Bahá'í National Archives, which has been abbreviated as "USBNA" in the photos' citations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1980, for the first time, my wife and I attended the Annual Souvenir Picnic of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Teaneck, New Jersey. As new nearby residents of the area, this event and the Wilhelm property where it was held immediately captured our hearts and imaginations. I wanted to know more, much more, and was fortunate that Ben Kaufman, Iris Tarafdar, Don Kinney, and other longtime Bahá'ís informally shared their memories with me about the early history of the Faith in New Jersey. This beginning led me to investigate further the story of that unique Bahá'í property with its log cabin and antique car, the Annual Picnic, and Roy Wilhelm—who started it all. It was soon apparent to me that there was a dearth of printed material, so I set a personal goal to document the history of that special property and event. Of course, Roy Wilhelm himself soon became the focus of my search.

For the last three decades I have spent many odd moments in dusty Bahá'í archives. These included those of Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Close to home, I searched the archives of the Bahá'í communities of New York City, and the following communities in New Jersey: Englewood, Teaneck, North Hudson, Ridgewood, and Jersey City. Other archival and government records I explored included North Lovell Historic Society, Maine Historical Society, Bergen County Office of Deeds and Records, and the Division of Old Records at the New York City Department of Records & Municipal Archives, among others. The Maine General Hospital, Lewiston, now called Central Maine Medical Center, allowed limited access to medical records. I wish to express my gratitude to everyone who assisted me with accessing materials at those archives.

I wish to express special thanks to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States for granting me access to its institutional records. The United States Bahá'í National Archives was a treasure trove of information, so I wish to thank its archivist Roger Dahl and his assistant Lewis Walker, who were invaluable help. Later, Edward Sevcik assisted in his role as the new archivist.

The International Bahá'í Archives at the Bahá'í World Center kindly shared correspondence and archival photographs.

Over time, I had the opportunity to have a number of informal conversations with those who knew Roy Wilhelm or information about him. These included the following people who have now departed for the next world: Mildred Mottahedeh; 'Alí Nakhjavání; Loretta Voltz; and especially Betty D'Arujo, who told me stories of her father, Carl Scheffler. Face-to-face and phone interviews with other individuals helped fill in several gaps. For those both named and unnamed, I am truly thankful.

Many friends guided my prolonged efforts and read nascent portions of this manuscript. Diane Iverson and James Mangan contributed additional information including several recorded interviews. Angelina Allen shared her research on John Bosch. Carol Rutstein made available documents from her father Curtis Kelsey. Graham Hassall's interview of Dudley Blakely was particularly helpful. Keith Korbut shared his keen interest in the REO touring automobile. Jay Levin's research contributed additional history for the town of Teaneck. Fran Pollitt offered insights on the Speckled Mountain, Maine period of Roy's life. The president of Kohler industries shared data on the power plants that were used to light the shrines in Haifa. Everett C. Golden III, President and COO of Otis McAllister, Inc., explained the 1962 demise of the R. C. Wilhelm corporation after its merger in 1957. Rodrigo Tomás helped with the investigation of Roy's time spent in Costa Rica and his son, Rodrigo Tomás Jr., provided the photograph of the coffee cupping process. Marybeth Vargha assisted with producing the map of the Wilhelm New Jersey property.

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic, which played havoc with many people's lives, made possible the many hours necessary to transform years of research into prose, my attempts to create an actual manuscript were not successful. Fortunately, Nat Yogachandra of the United States Bahá'í Publishing Trust offered the brilliant suggestion to collaborate with Kathryn Jewett Hogenson and Gary Hogenson as coauthors. That successful joint venture has resulted in this work. Weekly video conferencing sessions over many months and a delightful weekend together cemented our friendship.

A substantial component of this collaboration was the addition of several experienced authors and editors, including Dr. Michael Penn, Angelina Allen, Mary K. Makoski, and Jean Gould. Their assistance, editorial guidance, and meticulous checking of footnotes and grammar resulted in major revisions of the text over numerous iterations.

The staff of the Bahá'í Publishing Trust—including Nat Yogachandra, general manager; Bahhaj Taherzadeh, senior editor; and Christopher Martin, associate editor—were superb in their continual guidance, encouragement, and insights. I am also grateful to Martha Schweitz, Director of the Office of Review, for her helpful comments.

None of this would have been possible without the loving assistance, encouragement, and understanding of my wife, Vickie René Nizin, and daughters Zia Tahirih Rayner and Anisa Jamal Alabastro.

Joel Nizin

Ridgewood, New Jersey

January 20, 2023

PROLOGUE

Who was Roy Cochran Wilhelm? No doubt many of the readers of this book were first attracted to it not by his name, but by Roy's title *Hand of the Cause of God*. Bahá'ís want to know more about the individual lives of this unique, select band of fifty souls* who, for a short time, beginning during the Faith's Heroic age and continuing into the Formative age, served in exemplary ways as learned teachers and protectors of the Cause. Thus, for most Bahá'ís, the title *Hand of the Cause* brings to mind images of earlier believers who seem, with hindsight, to have been saints who accomplished tasks far beyond the capacity of others. Yet each one of them was quite mortal and certainly flawed; nonetheless, they rose above those very human traits to achieve great service, often by walking undaunted through the fires of tests. Each and every one of them is worthy of a closer look because they provide timeless inspiration and models for the generality of believers now and in the future. Anyone studying these extraordinary lives should ask: What can be learned from these stellar individuals? How can lessons from those exemplary lives be applied to present challenges and goals?

Roy Wilhelm—a quiet, gentle though iron-willed soul with a strong sense of humor—is generally not as well-known as many of the other Hands. His relative obscurity leads naturally to the question: What were those elements of his life that led Shoghi Effendi, upon learning of Roy's passing, to cable the Bahá'í world that he was "qualified to join the ranks of the Hands of the Cause of God?" The Guardian's message lauded his exemplary devotion, saintliness, indomitable faith, and his outstanding services to the administrative institutions of the Faith, whether local, national, or international. In

the same message, Shoghi Effendi referred to Roy as "an immovable pillar," and assured him of an everlasting reward in the Abhá Kingdom. He also bestowed upon Roy the honorific *Herald of the Covenant*.[1]

Roy's distinguished career as a servant to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi can be likened to the span of an arch, where the carefully chiseled and shaped stones of teaching, obedience, generosity, devotion, and service were held together by the keystone of his resolute faith. Many of his services were carried out behind the scenes, confidentially and without fanfare, but that did not make them any less important to the progress of the Cause.

One only needs to examine the life of Roy Wilhelm to find an example of excellence in every variety of Bahá'í service: spreading the Faith far and wide, administering the organization of its affairs at both the national and local level, and protecting it from those who attempted to create disunity or attack it. He was also instrumental in the development of the material assets of the Faith, not only in North America but also in other parts of the world, especially at the Center of the Faith in the Holy Land. He possessed a sterling character and was selfless, loyal, unfailingly kind, generous, trustworthy, and obedient to the guidance of the Faith. Besides those virtues, Roy was a practical man who always put the needs of the Cause ahead of his personal and material interests. He applied his knowledge acquired as a successful businessman—such as paying attention to his clients, acting in a timely manner, and never forgetting details—to his service to the Cause.

Years working as a salesman and serving customers enhanced his capacity to introduce the Faith to those who had never encountered it before, to accompany new believers, and to support the teaching work of other Bahá'ís. His expertise in organizing and running his own company, preparing budgets, and managing and scrutinizing financial statements fortified his administrative work on Local and National Assemblies, particularly when serving as an officer. Because his administrative service coincided with the period when those world-shaking institutions were in their infancy, he played a

significant role in establishing policies and procedures that are still used by Bahá'í institutions around the globe. He strove tirelessly for more than four decades to ensure the erection of the House of Worship in North America —the Mother Temple of the West. He also did everything in his power to assist 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi during the critical phases of development of the World Center. Furthermore, one of Roy's most valuable qualities was his innate ability to get along with anyone from any walk of life while at the same time exercising sound judgment. Little wonder then, whenever mischief or disunity threatened the Faith, he was often called upon to protect the Cause by privately counseling those who had strayed from the straight path. He unfailingly arose without hesitation whenever he was asked to take on delicate, difficult assignments.

Roy's life also exemplifies that of a Chief Steward—another title given to the Hands—without ever knowing that he would be included amongst that most venerated group. From the time when Roy first awakened to the verities and beauty of Bahá'u'lláh's message during the early years of the twentieth century, he never deviated from his distinctive life of humble service to the Cause. The bright light of such service, however, is not a flash of lightning, but rises slowly above the horizon like the morning sun, for his qualities as a Hand of the Cause of God emerged over a lifetime filled not only with service, but also effort focused upon spiritual growth, dedication, study, patience, weathering tests one after the other, and instant obedience. This work seeks to portray, however inadequately, Roy's mystical and hard-won transformation from a prosperous American businessman into a spiritual titan. When he reached the end of his life, he had become the much-loved immovable pillar of the Cause of God whom generations long into the future will admire and extol.

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* Bahá'u'lláh appointed four Hands of the Cause, all of whom were living at the time. 'Abdu'l-Bahá appointed four

Hands posthumously; however, there are hints that 'Abdu'l-Bahá made other posthumous appointments for which the documentation is missing at present. Shoghi Effendi appointed ten Hands posthumously and thirty-two who were living at the time of appointment. Roy was the last Hand appointed posthumously. (Please see "Hands of the Cause of God" at http://bahai-encyclpedia-project.org).

1 / A FRAGRANT BEAN

Bursts of sunlight broke through the black clouds, and as quickly as the tropical downpour arrived, it disappeared. The aging cargo ship, having completed a pitching and rolling journey across the Gulf of Mexico, at last bumped up against the creaking pilings at the port, and its engine fell silent. When his ship arrived at Puerto Limón—a small, isolated port on the Caribbean Coast of Costa Rica—Roy, probably for the first time, heard shouts in Spanish and Creole-English rather than American English coming from the sweat-drenched workers scrambling to make fast and unload the ship. Up on the slippery deck, the young man from the Midwest made his way to the rail in search of the gangway. With a look of confident optimism mixed with a touch of apprehension, he turned back and waved farewell to the handful of passengers and crew before making his way carefully down the gangplank that led from the ship to the pier. With his heavy baggage tugging at his arms, Roy gasped for breath in the steamy air as he took his first steps into an exotic world—the antithesis of his Ohio roots.

Once on firmer ground, Roy was directed to a small shack with a sign in Spanish that read *Aduana*—which means *customs house* in English. Inside, he was told to place his belongings on a table, where an agent pawed through them. Next, his bags were weighed, and Roy then paid the required duty on his few possessions. As he waited for the customs agent to complete his tasks, a quick survey of the unfamiliar surroundings may have brought on brief pangs of regret that he had left the comforts of his homeland. But ahead lay what he anticipated to be an adventure. His arrival in Limón at this Central American tropical port was one stop on Roy's lifelong journey to experience the wider world.[1]

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, Limón was a fever-infested, backwater settlement with fewer than three thousand inhabitants. But change was underway in the little country of Costa Rica, and the town was on the cusp of becoming a city. In 1890, the narrow-gauge railroad connecting that port with the country's principal cities to the west had been completed. At last, previously inaccessible regions were now open to commerce. This most basic of railway lines snaked through lowland swamps and soaring mountain passes. The raging rivers, steep granite mountains, soggy wetlands, and impassable roads had long served as natural barriers to developing commerce between Costa Rica and other countries. After years of financial insolvency, engineering nightmares, and thousands of worker deaths from accidents, yellow fever, malaria and other diseases, the railroad had at last opened for business to passengers and cargo.[2]

Leaving behind the noxious smells of tar and the harbor's sloshing black water, Roy walked from the custom house along narrow congested streets, where he had to sidestep muddy rain-filled holes as he sought lodging. After a night's sleep in a typical, spartan, roach-and-flea-infested establishment, his primary goal the next morning was to find the train station. Shopkeepers, roadside vendors, and their customers would no doubt have noticed the lanky American as he passed, while Roy's sensitive nose would have been assaulted by the unusual mix of pungent smells from discarded vegetables mingled with the sweet fragrance of fruits and flowers. The primary street cleaners were flocks of protected and valued turkey vultures that diligently went about their unending work of consuming all malodorous fruits, vegetables, and food items tossed out of the windows and doors of shops and houses. Peering into the unlit stores, Roy might have noticed sparsely stocked shelves —a subtle reminder of the challenges of living in such a remote outpost. If he had stopped to make a purchase or had asked for directions, Roy would have been able to figure out the local Caribbean-accented English, for most of the residents he encountered were descended from pre-

viously enslaved Africans who had been transported to Limón from Jamaica and other English-speaking Caribbean locations to work on banana plantations and the railway construction.

As soon as he arrived at the station, Roy purchased a ticket to his next stop: San José, the country's capital city. When the train departed for the cooler altitude of the central valley, clouds of steam, followed by smoke and soot from the puffing engine, no doubt drifted past Roy's window and settled on his shoulders and pant legs as he tried to get comfortable on the hard wooden seat. Any clammy breeze blowing through open windows would have offered paltry relief from the humid coastal heat. Roy, a fastidious dresser, was not wearing clothes for the tropics, a problem he could remedy in San José. Although the train trip was less than a hundred miles, the slow journey consumed most of the day and afforded Roy the opportunity to get a good look at his new home.

At first, the train rumbled across the swampy lowlands, past wobbly shacks on stilts, each nestled among a handful of cacao trees or small groves of broad-leafed banana trees. Every few miles, the train slowed or stopped to pick up or drop off passengers and freight in isolated towns with names such as *Moín* and *Siquirres.* In many places, only a small platform stood beside the tracks.

Most likely, the tropical landscape unfolding before him was different from what Roy expected. Guide and history books about Central America usually only highlighted the populated, economic, and political centers of a country, so anything he may have read prior to leaving the United States was probably focused mainly on San José and the surrounding cities in the higher elevations of the central valley. If he had stood on the platform at the rear of the train, Roy would have surveyed the panorama of sugar cane and long waving grasses punctuated by palm trees. Occasionally, other varieties of tall trees adorned with orange, yellow, or red blossoms would have presented a vibrant, multicolored vista unlike anything Roy had ever seen other than perhaps in picture books.

The Limón, Costa Rica Train Station in the 1920s, some years after Roy was there. (Public stock images, James Dearden Holmes photographer)

The train slowed almost to a crawl once it left the coastal plain and began its steep ascent toward the capital. As it made its way through tunnels of lush vegetation that brushed the sides of the cars, the passengers could feel the engine labor as it climbed the rolling foothills. Perhaps for the first time, Roy would have noticed that the comfort of hearing Creole-English, as he had in Limón, had been replaced with unfamiliar Spanish. By the time the train arrived in the cooler, busy agricultural outpost of Turrialba, it had climbed to an elevation of over two thousand feet since leaving the coast. During this brief stop, vendors rushed from window to window, scurried through the cars, and offered the riders drinks, bananas, tortillas, cheese, and hard-boiled eggs—welcome fare for hungry travelers. Over the next forty miles, the train ascended another three thousand feet to reach Cartago. After a brief stop in that quaint colonial capital, with its one-story white stucco buildings with red tile roofs, they were once again on their way.

On both sides of the track, leaping and chattering white-faced monkeys entertained the passengers, while a chorus of songs and squawks rang out from the menagerie of forest birds. This, along with the breaking

rapids of the Reventazón River below and streams cascading from soaring cliffs above would have created an exciting landscape for the young traveler. Over the next twenty miles, the train descended from its mountain zenith toward the vast central plateau and the town of San José. The volcano Irazú came into view, providing Roy with his first look at rows of emerald-green coffee bushes carpeting the rolling foothills. These shade-loving shrubs were his reason for coming to Costa Rica. The volcano, thankfully quiet at that moment, provided the rich earth that made the country's coffee exceptionally tasty. At last, the train lurched to a stop, and Roy stepped out onto the platform into the center of the world that would be his new home—a place with a different language and an unfamiliar culture.

Anecdotal references and recollections by friends unravel threads of Roy's journey to and life in Costa Rica. However, the details of how he traveled there, and of the nearly two years he owned his coffee farm, remain a mystery. What inspired this young man from the Great Lakes basin to leave the known for the unknown? Was he traveling alone, or with a friend or family member? Was there someone waiting for him when he arrived? How did he become interested in growing, importing, and selling coffee and ultimately making it his life's singular business interest and livelihood? The answers to these questions may never be known.

San José, with an abundance of urban businesses, was the political, economic, social, and cultural center of Costa Rica. The tropical *Belle Époque* city was swiftly modernizing following the installation of residential and commercial electric lights, telegraph lines and the recently added luxury of private telephones. Though oxcarts still clattered through its streets carrying cargoes of vegetables, bricks, and coffee, electric trolleys had replaced many of the earlier horse-drawn ones used for transporting people.

When Roy left the train station in the northeast corner of San José, he encountered streets, businesses, and homes unlike any he had experienced during his travels in the United States. On his way to the center of town along the magnificent tree-lined Avenida de las Damas —then a Parisian-inspired boulevard—he would have passed by older buildings—remnants of the time San José had been a Spanish colonial crossroads, but was then in the process of becoming a great European-style city.[3] Turning onto a side street, he would have carefully made his way down narrow sidewalks bounded largely by crumbling one-story adobe structures, which were then being replaced by more substantial multistory neoclassical buildings fashioned from brick and marble. Surrounded by parks and plazas, a new national theater (Teatro Nacional), reminiscent of the grandeur of the Palais Garnier opera house in Paris, was under construction, paid for by taxes on the owners of the numerous coffee farms, or *fincas*.

As impressive as San José was, Roy was not seeking a city in which to live. The verdant green of nearby suburbs and the surrounding countryside—the coffee farms —had drawn him to this lush spot in Central America. An exploding demand for coffee had sped up Costa Rica's race to join the modern world. Notwithstanding the wealth and power of the small number of coffee barons and their plantations, many of the farms in Costa Rica had fewer than a dozen hectares under cultivation where rich volcanic soil, the perfect amount of seasonal rainfall, and shaded mountain slopes at three- to five-thousand feet elevations produced high-value Arabica beans. Even today, the fertile highlands surrounding Costa Rica's central valley continues to be reputed as the best area for growing coffee in that country.

Sufficient evidence exists to conclude that at some time between 1896 and 1901, Roy owned a coffee farm in the environs of San José, but its exact location and size are unknown. Typically, the center of most farms in Central America was a two-room adobe house topped with red terracotta barrel roof tiles clinging to the side of a small hill. It would be decades before electricity and

indoor plumbing would extend beyond city centers, so Roy most likely heated water and cooked food on a cast iron, wood-burning stove. The morning work on a farm started early, and bedtime arrived early as well, although inside most modest farmhouses, kerosene lanterns were lit for a short period after sunset in order to finish up the last of the daily chores or to read a few lines from a favorite book. Stands of banana trees provided shade for chickens that were pecking at the ground in search for insects next to the farm's garden patch.

Roy would have needed someone to carry out the numerous chores of running his small farm and to watch over his property. When it was time to harvest his coffee, he would have also had to hire pickers when the coffee cherries turned from green to red. Often, entire families—father, mother, grandparents, and children—would scramble from bush to bush, meticulously plucking the red cherries, and carefully leaving the green ones for a later round of harvesting. A large woven basket, *la cajuela,* would be tied around each picker's waist leaving both hands free to work the coffee bushes. Once the baskets were filled, the cherries would be dumped into a colorfully decorated oxcart for transport down the mountain to a cooperative processing plant, the *beneficio*. There the coffee cherries would be washed, the pulp would be removed, and the remaining beans would be left to ferment. Finally, the beans would be scrubbed and laid out on a large concrete patio to dry in the sun. The clean, dry, green coffee beans, ready for export, would then be loaded into burlap bags.

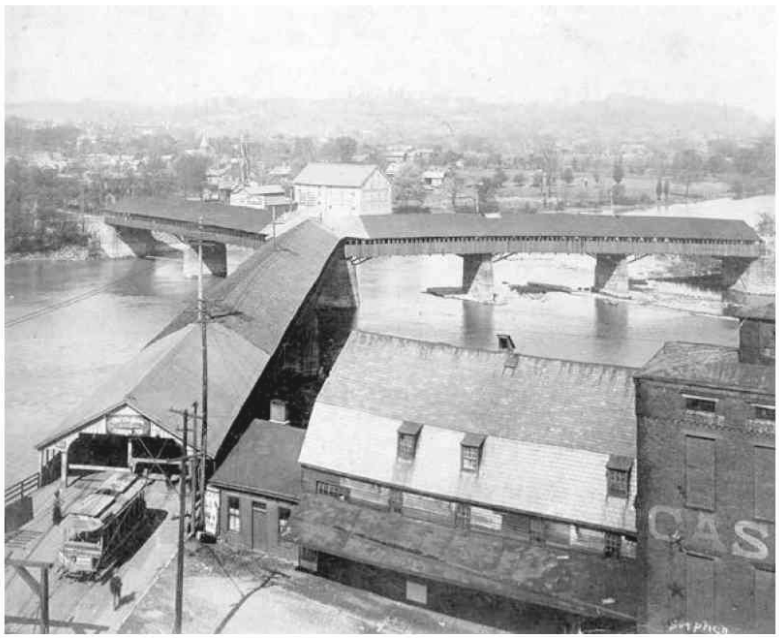
Roy's coffee growing endeavor in the highlands of Costa Rica, coupled with his earlier experience mastering the art of selling unroasted coffee beans to retailers, restaurants, and hotels throughout New England, laid the foundation on which Roy would build his fortune.

Roy inspects coffee trees, about 1896
(US Bahá'í National Archives)

Roy's own background and point of view reflected that of the majority White citizenry of the United Stated during his upbringing. As an adult, he was both knowledgeable and proud of his family's history, which could be traced back to the earliest days of the European colonization of North America. His ancestors—including the famous Captain Myles Standish, head of the militia for the Pilgrims at Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts—were among some of the first English settlers to make their home in New England. His German forefathers from the Wilhelm side of the family helped settle the wilds of Pennsylvania. He was well aware that he came from tough, courageous people. As a child, he had listened to stories told by his elderly relatives, who still remembered accounts of those pathfinders. Long before his own birth in 1875, Roy's family settled in the west of the Appalachian Mountains due to events that occurred eight decades earlier. In the years following the American Revolution, a treaty ending wars against the Native peoples of the Ohio Valley made it possible for White settlers to move westward across the mountains towards the Great Plains.* Roy's forbearers arrived with the earliest European immigrants to settle among the western foothills in the rolling fertile land through which the Muskingum River

flowed to join the Ohio River. Roy's ancestors helped cut timber used for road construction, built ferries to cross rivers in eastern Ohio, and cleared woodlands for farms. They were blacksmiths, tanners, millers, farmers, and lawyers; in fact, several of them earned their livelihoods through multiple trades. As pillars of their communities, Roy's ancestors left their marks on many local institutions, including churches and local governments.[4]

Roy's hometown, Zanesville, Ohio, was established in 1794 at the point where the Licking River met the Muskingum River. Initially settled as a small trading post along a trail blazed earlier by Native peoples, Zanesville began to resemble a town when its streets were laid out five years later.[5] Its unusual Y-shaped bridge, crossing both streams, became its best-known landmark. As the two rivers flowed through the town, they were just deep enough to handle flat-bottomed steamboats that transported passengers and goods throughout the region. Dams were constructed across both rivers, and water was channeled to turn the wheels of mills along their banks, and, eventually, to generate electricity for the town's growing number of small factories. Taking advantage of that well-situated location, Zanesville developed a diverse economy. Craftsmen and entrepreneurs made everything from furniture to coffins, saddles and harnesses to mattresses, beer and baked goods to doors and window blinds. For a short time, it became a textile center.



View of Zanesville, Ohio, about 1900
showing the confluence of the Licking and
Muskingum Rivers and the famous Y-Bridge
(Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection)

In 1890, when Roy was a teenager, Zanesville's first major pottery factory was opened to take advantage of the rich clay deposits found in the area. Pottery would become the primary product for which the city was known. By that time, Zanesville was already an industrial hub for the region with a thriving central commercial area and burgeoning residential neighborhoods. Frame two-story houses with front porches lined the unpaved streets in neat rows. All-in-all, Zanesville was a good place to live for a middle-class family like the Wilhelms.

During Roy's childhood, the city's population more than doubled, from 10,011 in 1870 to 21,009 according to an 1880 census.[6] While growing up, he would have encountered people from a variety of backgrounds, especially immigrants from Germany and Ireland. Moreover, he would have also come into contact with numerous Black citizens, since during the years prior to the Civil War, Zanesville had been an important stop on the "Underground Railroad," the clandestine system set up to help enslaved people from the Southern States flee to regions where slavery was no longer legal. Though many

escaped enslaved people only passed through the city, a significant number remained to fully become part of its growing community as free men and women.

At the time Roy was born on September 17, 1875—a mere ten years after the end of the Civil War—having a college education was rare; his father, John Otis Wilhelm, was one of the privileged exceptions to this rule. The son of a farmer, he first studied at Denison University, then completed his studies at Ohio Wesleyan University. Otis established a business as a wholesale merchant specializing in clothing and hats for women. The vagaries of selling for a living meant that it took years of hard work before Otis prospered. The family lived in a boarding house close to the Muskingum River[7] when Roy was young, but twenty years later, the Wilhelms owned a spacious clapboard home at 38 Thurman Street and could afford the services of a live-in housekeeper.[8]

Anna Laura Cochran Wilhelm, Roy's mother, who was usually called Laurie,[9] was born and raised in the small Ohio town of McConnelsville, downstream on the Muskingum River from Zanesville. Laurie's father, John Lowry Cochran, owned a tobacco factory that produced cigars. He died only two months before she was born, so she was raised by her widowed mother, Elvina Williams Waterman Wilson, who remarried at least once. Laurie had older siblings, half-siblings, stepsiblings, and young cousins within the large households in which she grew up. For a time, her family lived on a farm with her stepfather. Later the family moved back into McConnelsville where they lived with an uncle, and her older brothers found work in the family cigar business. On New Year's Eve, 1874, Laurie married Roy's father and moved with him to Zanesville.[10]

Otis and Laurie Wilhelm in front of Zanesville home, 1896 (USBNA)

Even though Roy was educated in local public schools, his proficiency with language bespoke a more cultivated background, most likely because of his father's educational achievements. It seems, nevertheless, that Roy did not like school. When he was a teenager, fed up with the demands of his teachers, he slipped away from Zanesville to find his own way in life. His family searched for him, found him, and brought him home. But his restlessness and dissatisfaction with his circumstances continued. He ran away again, but this time he was careful to leave no clues that would make it possible to track him. Searching for a means to support himself, he found a job selling pottery. It would be the first of many jobs he would take on as a traveling salesman, or "drummer."[11]

The itinerate life suited young Roy despite his parents' anguish over never being certain of his whereabouts. He did not complete high school, which was not uncommon in the late nineteenth century. Frequently, many students in their mid-teens left school to find work because their families needed their labor or the income contributed from their job. During this period in the

United States, anyone with intelligence, audacity, and a willingness to work diligently could still get along in life without educational credentials. Roy possessed these traits which, when mixed with his pleasing personality and folksy sense of humor, made him an asset to any employer. He quickly learned to manage his earnings and accumulate savings, and he learned a valuable lesson about trust and assessing a man's character when he once was swindled out of his savings.[12]

During his early career as a salesman, he sold a variety of products until he found one that struck his fancy. Coffee would take him from the highways of America to the mountains of Central America and finally to the center of commerce in New York City.[13] Most likely this lifetime interest began when he became a salesman—a job that also brought out the theatrical side of his personality—for the Victor Coffee Company. An 1898 newspaper article* reported how he put on a sales show worthy of a small circus:

> The Shapleigh Coffee Company of Boston is advertising its "victor" coffee in this city in a way which attracts much attention. The outfit came in a handsomely equipped car made specially for the purpose and which now stands on a sidetrack in the Fitchburg (railroad) yard. The company is represented by Roy C. Wilhelm, who has with him two men and five beautiful grey horses. Mr. Wilhelm uses a horse and a buggy to drive about the city and calls upon the merchants, while four of the horses are driven abreast by Mr. Brown, a stalwart African, who plays the cornet. The establishment is very showy and gives the small boys an idea that a circus has "struck" the city. The horses and whole outfit are carried in the (rail) car from place to place and the men, excepting Mr. Wilhelm, live in the car, which is supplied with many conveniences. The party will be in this city for two or three days.[14]

Victor Coffee label with its chariot logo

It is easy to imagine men, women and children lining the streets to witness this five-horse parade: a man dressed in an exotic costume standing in a chariot and four spirited gray horses straining at the reins, followed by a young man in a horse and buggy going from shop to shop with his coffee bags. The sales show not only gave Roy plenty of experience standing before crowds of people but also gave him the opportunity to work closely with his Black colleague, who drove the chariot and tended the horses. How long Roy participated in this tiny coffee circus is unknown, but it must have afforded him moments of fun.

By the time Roy returned to the United States after his sojourn in Costa Rica, he was still only in his mid-twenties. Nevertheless, he had already learned most aspects of the coffee business from the tree to the table. He had the beginnings of what he would need to make the fragrant bean his life's work.

1896 portrait of Roy Wilhelm (USBNA)

The Coffee Exchange and, consequently, the American coffee trade was concentrated around a few blocks of lower Manhattan in New York City, close to the waterfront, where Atlantic steamers docked, and Wall Street crossed Front Street. There, rows of coal yards and stables stood next to storehouses overflowing with the commodities and trade goods of the nation. Burly longshoremen wheeled bags of green coffee down gangplanks of ships arriving from Brazil and Central America, then the bags were piled high in Front Street warehouses.[15] Naturally, this was exactly the neighborhood in which to set up business as a coffee broker. New gold letters, spread across the second-floor window at number 104 at the foot of Wall Street, read: "R. C. Wilhelm & Co."[16] Thus, Roy began his career as a green coffee importer in the heart of the financial and wholesale mercantile district. What a fortuitous time to be an entrepreneur in that greatest of American ports!

View of New York City from the water in 1902
(New York City Archives, public stock images)

Roy settled into this unique city, perhaps the most cosmopolitan and modern city in the world at the time. Its residents were no longer the descendants of Dutch and English colonists but had become a diverse mixture of humanity. A flood of immigrants from the economically depressed regions of Europe had inundated the United States throughout the almost fifty years after the American Civil War.[17] For many of these hopeful newcomers, their first home after they stepped onto the soil of the New World was the lower eastern section of that port city, not far from the docks and commercial hub of Wall Street. When Roy established his office near that area, the lower east side was still an exotic, world-in-miniature filled with overcrowded, vermin-infested, disease-ridden tenements. Wave after wave of the poor and ambitious replaced earlier immigrants who were beginning to prosper economically and to finally be able to escape that section of Manhattan. Slowly, Russian, Irish, Italian, and eastern European families spread across the city and began to change, more and more, the culture of New York.

Besides having a diverse population, New York had other unique features. For example, it was the first city to install electric lines and power plants, so by 1900, it had conquered darkness in many of its neighborhoods. Electric trolleys and automobiles had begun to replace the thousands of horses that clopped through its cobbled streets every day. This exchange in modes of transport

gradually eliminated the stench from the tons of horse manure that had befouled the city air for centuries.[18] Manhattan's towering skyline was visible proof that Elisha Otis's invention of the safety elevator a few decades earlier had made it practical to construct buildings taller than five stories. Advancements in construction practices, low-cost and abundant steel, as well as the development of the steel girder also made possible the growing number of "skyscrapers."[19]

104 Wall Street, where Roy Wilhelm's Office was located on the corner of the second floor. (Photograph from the 1940s Tax Photo Collection, Works Progress Administration, and New York City Tax department)

In 1903, Roy's embryonic coffee brokerage received both a market and capital boost when he partnered with Robert Vickery, a Boston-based green coffee importer with a long history in the trade in New York and New England.[20] Together they expanded their company until Vickery's retirement in 1917. Roy then dissolved that enterprise and opened a new company under the rubric of Roy C. Wilhelm & Co., Inc. at the same 104 Wall Street address. A new partner, Alfred H. Hart, joined Roy and

his father, Otis, to reconstitute its board of directors. On the eve of the Great Depression in 1929, Hart passed away, and Roy became the sole owner and director of the company.[21]

The business of coffee is multifaceted, and Roy became an expert in every aspect of it. The process began with a grower on a plantation or tiny farm in a country somewhere between the latitudinal bands circling the globe where the finicky coffee tree grew well. As a broker, Roy had to know as much as possible about the origin and quality of the 69-kilogram (152 pounds) bags of green coffee beans he bought and sold, including the elevation, climate, and soil conditions of each farm, as well as each year's rainfall.[22] His brief experience as a coffee grower in Costa Rica gave him a different perspective from most of the other New York brokers. To further ensure the quality of his wares, he vigilantly tracked the harvesting, processing, storage, and shipping movements of each lot he bought. His clients were roasters, packers, and wholesalers, who sold to retailers, who then sold to restaurants and other consumers. Traditionally, coffee was first roasted in iron pans—whether in a coffeehouse, home, or over a soldier's campfire—then ground before it could be brewed. Coffee became a more convenient beverage when large rotary roasters came into use and roasted beans were ground, packed, and sold by neighborhood stores.

By the time Roy set up his business, larger companies —such as his primary clients, Maxwell House and Beech-Nut—began supplying roasted coffee in bags and one-pound tin cans. In 1901, a further innovation improved selling coffee to the consumer when Hills Brothers Company became the first company to package their coffee in vacuum-packed tins, which retained the freshness of the grounds. This innovation signaled the final demise of the tiny roasting shops and coffee mills scattered throughout the country.[23]

Roy's key employee during these early years was Margaret Raymond, a graduate of Gloversville Business School (NY) in bookkeeping and stenography.[24] She managed his correspondence, checked shipping reports

and warehouse receipts, and followed up with customers and suppliers. Of course, she quickly became accustomed to her boss's well-known sense of humor. Noting his humorous alterego signature, *A. Fragrant Bean,* which Roy sometimes scribbled on the bottom of letters to friends, must have brought a smile to her face.

The reputations of many brokers in the coffee trade were often darker than the brew itself, as the industry was rife with reports of deceit and misbranding. Brokers lied about the origin, classification, and quality of their beans. Worse yet, unscrupulous sellers would sometimes put stones and other heavy objects in bags of green coffee to increase their weight. One notorious incident that circulated among the traders on the street was the discovery that an iron stove had been concealed in a bag of coffee from Jamacia. Cutting corners and other forms of dishonesty, though tolerated conduct for many in the trade, were regarded as deplorable and disgraceful under the banner of R. C. Wilhelm & Co. Even though Roy was in a freewheeling competitive business and had to work hard to set himself apart from others in the trade while still turning a profit, over time, his resolute honesty resulted in his firm gaining a reputation for its integrity.

In order to raise the standards and practices of the coffee trade, Roy became a founding member of the Green Coffee Association of New York City, a standards board for writing coffee contracts, setting steamship and rail freight rates, settling disputes, and formulating rules of arbitration. Because of his upstanding character, his refined palate, his fair and honest dealings with suppliers and clients, and his expertise, he was often called upon to arbitrate quality or origin dispute cases. He also compiled a Green Coffee Shrinkage table used by buyers and sellers to facilitate weight loss calculations.[25]

Roy became a regular contributor to "coffee culture" awareness by giving lectures and writing articles for the industry's foremost publication, the *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal*, on topics such as detecting the essences of coffee, or judging its flavor by the roasting process, or the best techniques for making an excellent cup of coffee.[26] But he also had an exceptional nose to detect coffee's

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subtle aromatic characteristics and a sense of taste capable of detecting acidity, astringency, and thinness and thickness in the cup of coffee. The art of "cupping" coffee to test for aroma, flavor, and body came into practice about the time he began his career in the business. Clarence Bickford, of C.E. Bickford and Co., an early pioneer in developing standards and a market for high-quality coffee from Central America, is attributed with having introduced the cupping procedure in the marketplace.[27] Importers such as Roy no longer had to judge beans by appearance, color, size, imperfections, or qualities such as broken, unripe, or undeveloped. As a cupper, with his sensitive and experienced nose and palate, combined with roasting and then brewing a weighted amount of the selected beans, he and other cuppers would loudly slurp small amounts of coffee from a large spoon to aerate the sample as a way to detect the elusive components and volatile essence in the cup.

One commentator, mentioning trends in the coffee industry, not only discussed these developments but also cited Roy's company by name as an example of a business with honest, transparent practices:

> Having discovered the cup merit of high grown Pacific Slope Central American coffees, Bickford set about reinventing the coffee trade to suit his vision of it. He created the blind cup test to prove the merit of the Centrals against those beans which hitherto had brought premiums in the market. And he made it stick. Once roasters began to examine offerings for their cupping merit, values were revolutionized. Blending, for the first time, was put on a taste basis. Within a dozen years, importers and brokers throughout the land were advertising as did R.C. Wilhelm & Co. of New York in a 1905 edition of The Spice Mill "Cup Selections-Only."[28]

Rodrigo Tomás of Costa Rica demonstrates cupping coffee to determine its quality and origin

The New York Coffee Exchange was the clearing house for trades, but importers such as Roy built the warehouses, controlled the trade, and set prices. During his decades in the business, Roy was often selling in a market with little price elasticity when consumption was sometimes in decline. Wars, economic depressions, frosts, and rainfall each contributed to the supply and demand volatility of the coffee market. His intricate knowledge of not only coffee but also finances, shipping, international trade, and other business matters was crucial to his success as he navigated the ups and downs of the times and the markets.

During Roy's lifetime, coffee became America's most popular beverage. By 1940, the country imported seventy percent of the world's coffee crop. Within a few decades after his passing in 1951, coffee had, after water and tea, become the world's favorite beverage.[29] Roy played an important role in the development of the industry, especially in setting standards, and in the process, the coffee industry made him wealthy. However, his integrity and the knowledge he had gained about the complex fruit of the *coffea arabica* bush were not the only attributes that set him apart from his colleagues in the industry. He was also distinguished by how he used the material and business resources he had acquired through his business. His prosperity not only gave him the funds he could use to better the world, but his ownership of the company also meant he could freely structure his time and serve the Bahá'í Faith whenever he was needed. Without those little fragrant beans, Roy would have trodden a much rockier path of service in his striving to bring the healing message of the Bahá'í Faith to mankind.

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* In 1795, the US government signed a treaty with the Western Confederacy that ended the Northwest Indian War. The Nations included in the Confederacy were the Iroquois Confederacy, Seven Nations of Canada, Shawnee, Lenape, Kickapoo, Chickamauga Cherokee, and others. In exchange for land in what is now Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois, the Native peoples were promised funds, goods, and the assurance of yearly payments.

* The words used in the story reflect the language of the time in which it was written.

2 / TURNING POINT

When Roy's beloved mother wrote to inform her only child that she had accepted a new religion, he immediately became concerned. He knew well that his mother was a restless, lifelong seeker of spiritual truth, a church hopper, and a voracious reader of religious tracts. Consequently, when she gave her heart to a strange sounding new faith from Persia, he was hardly surprised that she had committed to one that appeared to offer a less conventional road to salvation. But he also feared she may have taken a wrong turn, perhaps leading her down a dangerous pathway. The new religion wasn't even Christian.[1]

The women in Roy's family had been religious seekers for at least three generations beginning with his maternal great-grandmother, Sarah Thomson Williams, who Roy met only once when he was about age ten. She was remembered for being an active member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, a Protestant denomination, spawned in England as an offshoot of the Anglican Church during a period of religious fervor in the years leading up to the American Revolution. With Bibles in their saddlebags, the denomination's itinerant American preachers rode on horseback across the vast countryside of the English colonies where they converted thousands of the far-flung frontier settlers through their down-to-earth approach to Christianity. Methodism emphasized the love of God for man and the idea that He could be worshipped under any circumstances: in the field, in the factory, in the shop, or at the entrance to a coal mine. As one of the most rapidly growing churches in the region along the eastern seaboard, Methodism also advocated rigorous moral standards and required its followers to eschew alcoholic beverages and card playing—both of

which were very much a part of American daily life during the formative years of the new Republic. In his youth, when he was a paid singer in a Methodist church's choir, Roy became immersed in the teachings of his great-grandmother's religion every Sunday morning.[2]

Another spiritual seeker among his ancestors was Roy's maternal grandmother, Elvina* Williams Cochran Wilson, who tragically lost her husband to cholera two months before she gave birth to Roy's mother. As a result, Roy's grandmother was left to raise a number of children by herself.[3] Perhaps this great loss, at such a pivotal moment in her life, may have led Roy's grandmother to search for a more mystical approach to spiritual truth than even that of her own Methodist mother.

Though Roy always considered his maternal grandmother to be highly intelligent and religious by nature, he could not recall her ever attending a church. She did not believe in paying clergy to promote the word of God. Her understanding was that Jesus of Nazareth had preached God's Message for humanity freely throughout His ministry and that He had instructed His disciples to do the same. For Elvina, this was the only proper approach to spreading God's Word. Instead of spending time sitting in a church pew, she studied the Bible intensely and became convinced from her extensive knowledge of that Holy Book that the time for the fulfillment of prophecies was near. She spoke to her grandson about her conclusions and admonished him to be vigilantly watchful for the Promised One—the return of the Messiah—who would usher in the Kingdom of God on earth.[4]

Roy's parents took him to a local Presbyterian church to provide him with a basic education in Christianity. One fruit of his Sunday school instruction was his lifelong familiarity with the Bible and his ability to quote scripture. Despite the Wilhelm family's participation in that Protestant congregation, his mother's spiritual thirst was never quenched. Like her mother and grandmother before her, Laurie began her own search, which came to include exploring religious teachings such as Christian Science and various other new American re-

ligious movements, many of which drifted further and further afield from those of conventional Protestant Christianity. Her search took her even onto the paths of religions apart from Christianity. Her son observed his mother's quest from the sidelines, asking himself, "What next?" The one conviction—which her own mother had firmly planted within her—that propelled her forward was the belief that the Great Day of God was near and that it would, perhaps, come during her own lifetime. She was determined not to miss the Promised One when He made His appearance.[5]

Portrait of the Wilhelm Family from 1902.
Left to right: Otis, Laurie, Roy. (USBNA)

While Roy, far away from his parents, was focused on himself and making his way in the world, his mother found among her Zanesville neighbors a kindred spirit, Laura Jones. Laurie and Laura shared the same ardent desire to find the promised Spirit of Truth if He was on earth. The two often discussed and pondered how they might go about discovering Him. Sadly, Laurie lost her spiritual ally when her friend moved to Chicago; however, what may have at first seemed to be a loss would prove to be the greatest blessing of her life, for it was there that her former neighbor and fellow seeker first encountered the Bahá'í Faith.[6]

The Bahá'í Faith in the West began quietly in the parlor of a Chicago businessman in the early summer of 1894.[7] The four inquirers after truth present that historic June evening had come hoping to obtain spiritual instruction from a Lebanese immigrant. Ibrahim Kheiralla was the only Bahá'í in the Americas at the time, albeit a less than satisfactory spokesperson of the Faith for many reasons, including character faults which would be his undoing a few years later. He himself was a new believer with only a cursory knowledge of the Faith's teachings and history, and much of what he had learned from his Bahá'í teachers in Egypt was either incorrect or incomplete. To make matters worse, what he did not know about the Faith, he made up. However, having been educated in Protestant schools, he was familiar with Biblical prophecy and applied it to teaching the Faith, thereby enthralling his eager listeners. Only after weeks of lessons would he finally reveal the identity of God's latest Messenger, Bahá'u'lláh, Who had recently passed away in the Holy Land in 1892.[8] Despite Kheiralla's shortcomings, the spirit of divine truth flowing through that impure channel was strong enough to capture a growing number of hearts, one of which belonged to Roy's mother's friend and former neighbor, Laura Jones.

Laurie's inner joy can only be imagined when she opened a fat envelope from her friend in Chicago and read its contents about the Bahá'í Faith. Fortunately, by late 1898 or early 1899 when she would have received the letter, Americans had already begun to visit Bahá'u'lláh's Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in the Holy Land and were sending back reports of the true teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. Within the few brief years that had passed since those first introductory lessons in a Chicago home, hundreds had embraced Kheiralla's version of the Faith and carried it across the country, from New York City to Oakland, California. Laura had also tucked a small pamphlet about the Faith into the envelope along with an early English translation of The Hidden Words of

Bahá'u'lláh—concise words of spiritual wisdom similar to the Book of Proverbs in the Bible. As soon as Laurie read this sacred Bahá'í scripture, she immediately knew her quest was at an end. She had indeed found the Promised One for Whom she and her mother had searched through many decades.

When Roy's mother, her heart full to bursting with the good news, wrote to him about the new religion, he may have been preparing to leave the United States or was perhaps already living in Costa Rica. A newspaper clipping about 'Abdu'l-Bahá that also included a picture of Him was enclosed in her letter. The photograph had been taken decades before when He was younger, so with His dark, long hair and beard, He looked every bit like the image many Americans held in their minds of Jesus. Roy understood from that brief account that many regarded 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a return of the Spirit of God. He was, however, unimpressed, and scribbled on the margins of the article, "Strange if true," and returned it to his mother.[9]

A short time after Roy left Costa Rica and settled in New York City, his parents came to visit. His mother was the sole Bahá'í in central Ohio and, of course, was eager to meet other Bahá'ís, so Roy obliged her by accompanying her to Bahá'í gatherings around the city. He was not yet genuinely interested in pursuing the Faith for himself but instead hoped that, by learning more about it, he could show her that it was "a fad born of the anti-Christ."[10]

The New York Bahá'í community was established when the polymath Arthur Pillsbury Dodge moved there in late 1897 from Chicago, where he learned about the Faith by attending Kheiralla's classes.[11] He lost no time in introducing his newfound religion to those around him. Among his friends was Howard MacNutt, another businessman and an internationally known cricket player, who quickly embraced the Cause. Dodge felt unqualified to give more than a superficial summary of the Faith, for

he had been instructed by his teacher to share its teachings cautiously and secretly, just as it was being propagated in Kheiralla's Ottoman Empire homeland, where its followers were persecuted. Dodge, therefore, invited Kheiralla to come to New York for an extended visit to conduct Bahá'í classes. Besides MacNutt and his wife, other members of that first Manhattan class included James and Isabella Brittingham, a couple from New Jersey who had heard about the Faith through James' sister. The Brittinghams and Howard MacNutt became important to the early development of the Faith in the United States and would become Roy's friends.

In the winter of 1898–1899, Kheiralla traveled with a group of Americans to the Holy Land where, for the first time, they all met the head of the Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Kheiralla was given a welcome worthy of a hero who had achieved a glorious victory. He alone could be credited with introducing and spreading the Bahá'í Faith in North America—a signal achievement. But accolades were insufficient for him. Kheiralla wanted to be formally placed in charge of the American Bahá'í community with a commensurate salary. When these rewards for his efforts were not forthcoming, he rebelled against 'Abdu'l-Bahá, unveiling his true character in the process.[12] When Kheiralla's attempt to wrest control of the American Bahá'í community erupted in 1899, the New York Bahá'í community became embroiled in this unfortunate affair. Most of its believers stood steadfastly allegiant to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, due in part to His sending knowledgeable Persian Bahá'ís to fortify the nascent community. One of these was the renowned scholar Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, who not only tutored the Americans in the authentic teachings of the Faith but wrote an introductory text for them, which was translated into English and published.[13] The New York Bahá'ís were still recovering from this traumatic period of disunity when the Wilhelms began to attend meetings in 1902.[14] Despite having lost the teacher who first introduced them to the Faith, the community gained something much better—frequent direct communications with 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Himself. The spirit of the community was rising and had become anchored upon a surer foundation.

Those who established the Faith in New York were stalwart believers, at least four of whom would be named Disciples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá after their passing. These included one of the first believers to accept the Faith in Chicago—William Hoar, a Canadian businessman who had relocated to New York where he and his family became vital members of the community. The Hoars and Dodges had made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land together in 1900, where their steadfastness had been strengthened by offering prayers at the tomb of Bahá'u'lláh and by spending many hours with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. These families: the Dodges, MacNutts, Hoars and Brittinghams—spiritual giants all—were the primary leaders of the New York area Bahá'í community in 1902. Howard MacNutt, in particular, was a gifted speaker and often the one who conducted introductory classes. These sessions focused upon the basic truth that God had sent a new Messenger into the world, Bahá'u'lláh, and that His Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was the one to Whom all should turn as their guide after Bahá'u'lláh's passing in 1892.

The first Bahá'í gathering the Wilhelms attended was held at the Dodge home. There Roy met the Hoars and two members of the first group of Westerners to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahá: Dr. Edward Getsinger, a homoeopathic physician from Michigan who had taken up residence in the New York area; and May Maxwell, who would become a treasured, lifelong friend. Though born in New York and raised across the Hudson River in New Jersey, May had already become the spiritual mother of the Paris Bahá'í community and, at the time she first met Roy, was newly married to a Canadian architect and living in Montreal.[15] Remembering his first encounter with the Bahá'í community, Roy would say later that he became "conscious of a strong heart attraction before much understanding came."[16]

1898, the Dodge and Hoar families. Left to right: Elizabeth Ann Dodge, Arthur Pilsbury Dodge, Ann Mason Hoar, William Hoar, child on floor is unidentified (USBNA)

In His Writings to the Western Bahá'ís, 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeatedly emphasized the importance of unity and that the believers should love one another—a goal not always easy to achieve as forceful personalities emerged and clashes between members began to erupt within this small but growing group. The initial gatherings of believers in the United States relied heavily on references to the Bible, especially prophecies fulfilled by the coming of Bahá'u'lláh. Many of the people investigating the Faith were also interested in the subject of metaphysics and previously had been involved in other unconventional religious movements, such as New Thought and Theosophy. These seekers often diverted group discussions toward the pondering of dreams and miracles, and although his mother found these topics fascinating, they did not interest Roy.[17] The few authentic Bahá'í scriptures available in English at the time (usually ineptly translated) were coveted and memorized. Any time a new letter or Tablet arrived from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, it was read aloud at the next gathering then copied and circulated among the friends.

Over the first five years of the twentieth century, several dozen Americans made the journey to 'Akká in Ottoman-held Palestine and returned to the United States with glowing faces reflecting the transformation within

their hearts. These pilgrims traveling to and from the Holy Land generally passed through New York, affording the friends living in that port city the privilege of hearing their accounts firsthand. They all understood the significance of their time in the Holy Land, and several of them wrote about their experiences and circulated printed versions of their notes.

After his mother returned to Zanesville, Roy continued to be drawn to Bahá'í gatherings. Some were held in rented rooms at Carnegie Hall, and others were held at the Manhattan homes of the Dodge and MacNutt families. Through his continued study of the Faith, Roy was never able to prove that it was fraudulent, a fad, or a passing fancy of his mother's; instead, over time, he was surprised to find himself increasingly attracted to it, and after a year of attending meetings, he finally accepted that it was indeed from God.[18] His heart had been moved and awakened.[19] But his commitment was far from solid despite his growing involvement in the Bahá'í community. He began to include visits to Bahá'ís during his business travels around the country, and he often offered his services as a speaker. Within two or three years, he identified himself as a Bahá'í and was listed on the membership rolls that existed at the time.

During those early years of the Faith in North America, there was no formal method of enrollment. Lists of names were kept for administrative purposes, especially in the New York and Chicago areas, but the primary method by which someone entered the Faith was to write to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Even after doing so, there was no requirement that the new Bahá'í relinquish membership in another religion. Apparently, after Roy decided he was indeed a Bahá'í, he did not write to 'Abdu'l-Bahá; so, in 1904, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, wrote to him first:

Roy Wilhelm in 1902 (USBNA)

> He is God!
>
> O thou attracted to the Beauty of the Glorious One!
>
> No letter has ever been received from you; but I am always trusting in the Bounty of God that He may reveal to thee the mysteries of the Perfect Wisdom, so that thou mayest comprehend the occult [sic] of the Universal Reality and that the Light of Guidance may shine as the ray of the Morn of Truth!
>
> Upon thee be greeting and praise
>
> Signed Abdul Beha Abbas[20]

This Tablet was followed on October 18, 1904, by a second letter from ʻAbdu'l-Bahá to Roy, in response to an (apparently mistaken) report from Mírzá Abul-Faḍl stating that Roy wished to fully defray the costs of sending a Bahá'í teacher from New York to India:

May the Glory of El Abha be upon him!

O thou attracted to the Lights of the Sun of Truth!

His honor, Abel Fezail, [sic] gave me the news that thou desirest to diffuse the Fragrances of the Divine Rose Garden! This intention is very splendid and this purpose is a Divine Inspiration!

Happy! Happy! That thy design is (to assist) that the Manifest Light may shine upon the Universe and the Cloud of Mercy may shower upon the mortals!

If thou send Mr. Harris to India, that he may guide the heedless ones, it is very pleasing and advisable and great results are hoped for.

I beg of God, that thou mayest by confirmed in the service of the Kingdom and become the appearance of Divine Blessing in the contingent world!

(Signed) Abdul Beha Abbas[21]

Although Roy sent a letter responding to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, its contents are unavailable at this time. He along with a few others did, however, provide some of the necessary funds for the young New York lawyer, Hooper Harris, along with a traveling companion, to journey to India to spread the Faith. This was the first time Roy helped to deputize another believer's travels to teach the Cause and would not be the last. By December 1904 'Abdu'l-Bahá had composed the following response to Roy, suggesting that He knew He was writing to a sincere seeker of truth who was not yet a confirmed believer.

O servant of God!

The contents of thy letter was replete with Spiritual feelings, and was a source of pleasure and of joy.

> Of my freedom thou hast expressed great joy. I am free, although I should remain in prison. All the fortresses and castles shall not confine me, and the dungeon cannot bring me under the narrow bondage of the world.
>
> The Spirit is ever soaring even if the body be in the depths. What can these ignorant creatures do? They might imprison the body, but the Spirit they cannot: the Spirit will ever soar in the atmosphere of Eternal bliss and glory.
>
> Therefore, neither the prison is a cause of sorrow nor freedom from it a source of joy.
>
> When thou findeth the way to the Kingdom, the earthly world shall be of no account, and when thou art illumined, the darkness will not affect thee —nay, rather the four corners of the earth will then be radiant and every thorn will become a rose and a rose garden.
>
> Upon thee be greeting and praise
>
> (Signed) Abdul Baha Abbas.[22]

Even though 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself seemed to be reaching out to Roy to strengthen his beliefs, Roy's connection to the Bahá'í Faith was growing but still tenuous, and he had other things on his mind besides the newfound Faith. For instance, he was building his business, and the demands of day-to-day life in Manhattan undoubtedly consumed him. Because he had a unique talent for sales, the ability to manage money, and had acquired expertise in his trade, by 1907, he was well on the way to achieving success as a coffee broker. Indeed, he had become prosperous enough to reside in a modest apartment located within the newly developed West Side neighborhood of Morningside Heights.[23] It was close to the campus of Columbia University, which was sur-

rounded by many multistory residential buildings that were under construction, as well as new office buildings to house various medical and religious institutions.[24]